Notes on a scandal

NOTES ON A SCANDAL: ROBISON, SCOTT, AND THE RECEPTION OF KOTZEBUE IN SCOTLAND

The reception of the German dramatist August von Kotzebue (1761-1819) in England has been well documented to date. The craze for his overly sentimental works amongst the wider public was, in the words of Julie Carlson, 'only matched by the critics' hatred'.[1] Hannah More's treatise Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education (1799) and Jane Austen's novel Mansfield Park (1814), for example, present lucid examples of English reactions to Kotzebue's scandalous and allegedly immoral plots. Since the publication of Walter Sellier's account of Kotzebue in England in 1901,[2] countless authors have addressed the phenomenon of 'Kotzbue-mania' in England, but little literature has considered the status of his works in Scotland. David Lindsay's 1963 article on 'Kotzebue in Scotland, 1792-1813' is the only such work to exist to my knowledge and it goes some way in collating the details of the reception of Scottish performances of Kotzebue's plays in the Scottish periodical press between the years 1799 and 1813.[3]

Given the status of literary and scientific circles in Scotland at the end of the eighteenth century, however, they should not be overlooked as a means of kick-starting and directing the reception of foreign literature at the time. Henry Mackenzie's 'Account of the German Theatre', delivered to the Royal Society of Edinburgh on 21 April 1788, is a case in

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[1] Julie Carlson, 'Unsettled Territory: The Drama of English and German Romanticisms', Modern Philology, lxxxviii (1990), 43-56 (45).

[2] Walter Sellier, Kotzebue in England. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der englischen Bühne und der Beziehungen der deutschen Litteratur [sic.] zur englischen (Leipzig: Oswald Schmidt, 1901).

[3] David W. Lindsay, 'Kotzebue in Scotland, 1792-1813', PEGS, xxxiii (1963), 56-74.

point, as it was a direct cause of interest in German plays amongst Edinburgh's literati, who, in turn, influenced what would play at Edinburgh's Theatre Royal. One significant member of Edinburgh's vibrant literary, scientific, and philosophical culture at the end of the eighteenth century was the physicist John Robison (1739-1805). Robison was the founding General Secretary of the Royal Society of Edinburgh from 1783-98 and Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh. Among his better-known publications is his Proofs of a Conspiracy, written in 1797 and published in 1798. Robison's book sets out to document what he calls – still in the title – 'a Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments of Europe', carried out by the Illuminati and the Freemasons. As is well known, Robison cites Kotzbue's Doctor Bahrdt mit der eisernen Stirn, oder Die deutsche Union gegen Zimmermann (1790) as one of the 'good authorities' backing up his research.[4] This play purports to be by one 'Freiherr von Knigge', being Adolph Knigge (1752-1796) a Freemason and leading member of the Illuminati, and it consists of a group of twenty-two notable German figures of the time led by the controversial theologian Karl Friedrich Bahrdt (1741-1792), meeting in a brothel to bring about the downfall of the physician and popular philosopher Johann Georg Zimmermann (1728-1795).

Robison's own copy of Doctor Bahrdt is in the collection of the National Library of Scotland. He appears to have acquired it in 1794 and then passed it on for inclusion in the collection of the Library of the Faculty of Advocates only a few years later: it still bears the old shelf-mark 'David I. 5. 10', indicating that it was catalogued by the Advocates in the 1790s. This copy also contains an eight page-long handwritten essay by Robison, jotted on the front end paper, back end paper, flyleaves, and further blank pages, documenting the

[4] John Robison, Proofs of a Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments of Europe, Carried on in the Secret Meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati and Reading Societies. Collected from Good Authorities (London/Edinburgh: Cadell and Davies/Creech, 1798), 341.

scandal surrounding the authorship of Doctor Bahrdt that flared in Germany between 1790 and 1792. Robison does not give sufficient detail on the matter of his sources such that they could be traced, but he illustrates an in-depth knowledge of the nature of the accusations made against Knigge and others, including Jakob Mauvillon's (1743-1794) role in attributing authorship. While Robison's essay begins with mention of Bahrdt as 'the most infamous founder of the German Union of the 22 men',[5] whose Kirchen und Ketzer Almanach für das Jahr 1781 'was filled with the most horrible and mortifying abuse', his attention quickly turns to the question of authorship, tracing the ins and outs of the scandal through Zimmermann's alleged authorship to that of (the fictitious) Friedrich Leibrecht Schlegel. He notes that, eventually Kotzebue ceased to deny authorship of the play. Notably, the lesson Robison draws from this incident is twofold. 'We see from the whole that Kotzebuh [*sic*] is a most worthless Fellow', he writes, 'not only for such filthy Scenes', which 'inflame the passions', but 'chiefly for his endeavours to bring disrespect' on both the people and customs that maintain social order.

Robison's eye for a conspiracy, it would seem, was well trained to follow one to its conclusion and, in this case, it briefly diverted him from his research into Freemasonry and the Illuminati. Indeed in his Proofs of a Conspiracy Robison 'cannot recollect' Kotzebue's name when referring to Doctor Bahrdt.[6] But shortly before Kotzebue was to acquire fame in Britain and his name was to become synonymous with German drama,[7] the ground was being

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[5] Doctor Bahrdt mit der eisernen Stirn, oder Die deutsche Union gegen Zimmermann. Ein Schauspiel in vier Aufzügen, von Freyherrn von Knigge ([Leipzig]: 1790), n. p. The copy of the play in question is currently shelved under [Ome].2.6 at the National Library of Scotland.

[6] Robison, Proofs of a Conspiracy, 341.

[7] The contents of British anthologies of German theatre from the end of the 1790s might have led a contemporary readership to expect the German-speaking world to be able to offer little

laid in Edinburgh for an author still relatively unknown in Britain to acquire a bad reputation – not just for his plays themselves, but for his person. What is more, Robison's position amongst the literati of post-Enlightenment Edinburgh gave him access to others engaged in the active reception of German drama at the time, foremost among them Mackenzie and a young Walter Scott. Writing his 'Essay on the Drama' for the Encyclopaedia Britannica in 1819, Scott makes his thoughts on Kotzebue clear. For Scott, Kotzebue's plays are full of 'demoralizing falsehood' and he laments that 'by some unfortunate chance the wretched pieces of Kotzebue have found a readier acceptance, or more willing translators' than any other German playwright.[8] Scott's own library at Abbotsford contains a copy of Kotzebue's Bruder Moritz, oder Der Sonderling (1790), bound together with two plays by August Wilhelm Iffland (1759-1814), one of which – Die Mündel (1784) – he translated in 1796 and still exists in manuscript form.[9] When translating a number of German plays in the years 1796 to 1798, Scott did not translate one by Kotzebue, even though several were available in

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else than Kotzebue: for one, Alexander Thomson's The Germany Miscellany, printed a Perth in 1796, contains a translation of Kotzebue's Die Indianer in England as the only full-length play in its eclectic selection of five texts; and Benjamin Thompson's six-volume work, The German Theatre, originally published in 1801, features nineteen plays, of which ten are translations from Kotzebue. For a recent publication on Kotzbue in England, see Carlotta Farese, 'The Strange Case of Herr von K: Further Reflections on the Reception of Kotzebue's Theatre in Britain', in The Romantic Stage: A Many-Sided Mirror, ed. Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Fabio Liberto (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2014), 71-84.

[8] Walter Scott, 'Essay on the Drama', in The Miscellaneous Prose Works of Sir Walter Scott, Bart. in 28 vols (Edinburgh: Cadell, 1834-36), VI, 217-395 (385-6).

[9] The Wards, from the German of Will. Augustus Iffland [trans. Walter Scott], MS Abbotsford Library – N.3.10.

various collections around Edinburgh and Lothian at the time. Instead, his attention and esteem go to a selection of six plays by authors including Goethe, Schiller, and Lessing, and the now much lesser-known Iffland, Jacob Maier (1739-1784), and Joseph Marius von Babo (1756-1822).[10] In the light of Robison's opinion of Kotzebue's works and character, Scott's response to the latter should, perhaps, come as no surprise. Reading up on Kotzebue in 1794, Robison provides us with perhaps the earliest example of the active reception of Kotzebue in Britain and, at that, one that was being undertaken in Scotland. And it helps to shed light on Scott's apparent refusal to count any of Kotzebue's works among what he holds to be the 'Chefs d oeuvres [*sic*] of the German stage'.[11]

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[10] The plays Scott translated between 1796 and 1798 were: Goethe's Götz von Berlichingen, mit der eisernen Hand (1773; Scott translated Goethe's 1787 revised version); Schiller's Die Verschwörung des Fiesco zu Genua (1783), Lessing's Emilia Galotti (1771), Iffland's Die Mündel, Maier's Fust von Stromberg (1782), and Karl Franz Guolfinger von Steinsberg's (1757–1806) adaptation of Babo's Otto von Wittelsbach (1783).

[11] Walter Scott to Cadell and Davies, Edinburgh. 5 May 1798, printed in Ruth M. Adams, 'A Letter by Sir Walter Scott', Modern Philology, liv (1956), 121-3 (121).